Niccolò Machiavelli's sermon
(*Exortatione alla penitenza / Exhortation to Penitence*)

Circa 1526

Exhortation to Penitence

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine; Domine, exaudi vocem meam. [1] Having, this evening, honored fathers and elder brothers, to speak to your charities—in obedience to my superiors—somewhat concerning penitence, it has seemed good to me to begin my exhortation with the words of the vessel of the Holy Spirit, the prophet David; so that those who have sinned along with him may, by his words, hope to receive mercy from the most high and most clement God; nor, since he obtained it, should they be dismayed about being able to obtain it, because from that example neither greater error nor greater penitence in a man can be understood, nor in God can greater generosity in forgiving be found. And therefore with the words of the prophet we shall say: "*O Lord, I, positioned in the depth of sin, have with a humble voice and full of tears called to You, O Lord, for mercy; and I pray You, and may You be pleased, through Your infinite goodness, to grant it to me*." Nor let there be anyone, therefore, who despairs of being able to obtain it, provided that with tearful eyes, with an afflicted heart, with a mournful voice he asks for it. O immense mercy of God! O infinite goodness!

The most high God knew how easy it was for man to slip into sin; He saw that, if He had to stand on the severity of vengeance, it was impossible for any man to be saved; nor could He provide for human frailty with a more compassionate remedy than by warning humankind that not sin, but perseverance in sin, could render Him implacable; and therefore He opened to men the way of penitence, through which, having lost the other way, they might through this one ascend to heaven.

Penitence, therefore, is the sole remedy to erase all the evils, all the errors of men; which, although they are many and committed in many and diverse ways, can nevertheless broadly be divided into two parts: the one is to be ungrateful to God, the other to be an enemy to one's neighbor. But, wanting to recognize our ingratitude, it is necessary to consider what benefits we have received from God. Think, therefore, how all things made and created are made and created for the benefit of man. You see first the immense space of the earth, which, so that it could be inhabited by men, He did not allow to be entirely surrounded by waters, but left part of it uncovered for his use. He then caused so many animals, so many plants, so many herbs, and whatever thing is generated upon it to grow for his benefit; and not only did He want the earth to provide for his living, but He also commanded the waters to nourish infinite animals for his food.

But let us detach ourselves from these earthly things; let us lift our eyes to heaven; let us consider the beauty of those things that we see, of which He made part for our use, part so that, recognizing their splendor and admirable work, we might come to thirst and desire to possess those other things that are hidden from us. Do you not see how much effort the sun endures to share its light with us, to make both us and those things created for us by God live by its power? Therefore everything is created for the honor and good of man, and man is created solely for the good and honor of God: to whom He gave speech so he could praise Him; He gave him a face not turned toward the earth as with other animals, but turned toward heaven, so he could continually see Him; He gave him hands, so he could build temples, make sacrifices in His honor; He gave him reason and intellect, so he could speculate on and know the greatness of God.

See, therefore, with what ingratitude man rises up against so great a benefactor! And how much punishment he deserves when he perverts the use of these things and turns them to evil! And that tongue, made to honor God, blasphemes Him; the mouth, with which he ought to nourish himself, he turns into a sewer and a channel to satisfy his appetite and stomach with delicate and superfluous foods; those speculations on God he converts into speculations on the world; that appetite to preserve the human species becomes lust and a thousand other lascivious acts. And thus man, through these ugly deeds, transforms himself from a rational animal into a brute animal. Man, therefore, by practicing this ingratitude against God, turns from an angel into a devil, from a master into a servant, from a man into a beast.

Those who are ungrateful to God cannot fail to be enemies to their neighbor. They are enemies to their neighbor who lack charity. This, my fathers and brothers, is that alone which leads our souls to heaven; this is that alone which is worth more than all the other virtues of men; this is that of which the Church speaks so broadly, that whoever does not have charity has nothing; of this Saint Paul says: *Si linguis non solum hominum, sed angelorum loquar, caritatem autem non habeam, factus sum sicut aes sonans* ("*If I were to speak with all the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am just like a sound without fruit*") [2]; upon this is founded the faith of Christ. He cannot be full of charity who is not full of religion, because charity is patient, is kind, has no envy, is not perverse, is not puffed up, is not ambitious, does not seek its own benefit, does not get angry, does not think evil, does not rejoice in evil, does not enjoy vanities, endures everything, believes everything, hopes everything [3]. O divine virtue! O happy those who possess you! This is that celestial garment with which we must clothe ourselves if we want to be admitted to the celestial wedding of our emperor, Christ Jesus, in the

heavenly kingdom; this is that of which whoever is not adorned will be driven from the banquet and placed in eternal fire.

Whoever, therefore, lacks this must of necessity be an enemy to his neighbor, does not help him, does not bear his faults, does not console him in tribulations, does not teach the ignorant, does not advise him who errs, does not help the good, does not punish the wicked. These offenses against one's neighbor are great, the ingratitude against God is greatest; into which two vices because we frequently fall, God our benign Creator has shown us the way of getting back up: which is penitence. The power of which He has shown us with deeds and with words: with words, when He commanded Saint Peter to forgive seventy times seven times a day to the man who asked him for forgiveness [4]; with deeds, when He forgave David his adultery and murder [5], and to Saint Peter the injury of having denied Him not just once, but three times [6].

What sin will God not forgive you, my brothers, if you truly bring yourselves to penitence, since He forgave these sins of theirs? And not only did He forgive them, but He honored them among the first elect in heaven, solely because David, prostrated on the ground, full of affection and tears, cried out: *Miserere mei, Deus* [7]; solely because Saint Peter *flevit amare*, always wept bitterly over his sin [8]; David wept over it, and both earned forgiveness.

But because it is not enough to repent and weep, for it is necessary to prepare ourselves in works contrary to the sin, so as not to be able to err anymore, to take away the occasion of evil, it is fitting to imitate Saint Francis and Saint Jerome. Who, to suppress the flesh and take away its ability to force them into iniquitous actions, the one rolled in brambles, the other tore his chest with a stone. But with what stones or with what brambles shall we suppress the will toward usury, toward infamies,

toward the deceits that are done to one's neighbor, if not with alms and with honoring and doing good to him? But we are deceived by lust, wrapped in errors, and entangled in the snares of sin, and we find ourselves in the hands of the devil. Therefore it is necessary, to get out of it, to recur to penitence and cry with David: *Miserere mei, Deus!* [7] and with Saint Peter weep bitterly [8], and be ashamed and repent of all committed faults, and clearly recognize:

that all that pleases the world is a brief dream. [9]

Endnotes: Extended Contextual & Biblical Citations

1. ***De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine…:*** Psalm 130:1–2 (Vulgate Psalm 129:1–2): *"De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine; Domine, exaudi vocem meam".*
    - **Context:** Psalm 130 is one of the seven traditional Penitential Psalms in Christian liturgy (along with Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, and 143). In Catholic tradition, particularly within lay confraternities (*compagnie di penitenza or flagellanti*) in Renaissance Florence, reciting the *De Profundis* was a central ritual opening for devotions and exhortations. Machiavelli structures his entire sermon around David as the archetype of the fallen yet pardoned sinner whose public lamentation serves as a model for civic and spiritual renewal.

2. **Si linguis non solum hominum…**: 1 Corinthians 13:1.
    - **Context:** Saint Paul's famous passage on caritas (charity/love). Machiavelli quotes the Latin line with a minor textual variation common to Renaissance sermonizers ("*Si linguis non solum hominum, sed angelorum...*" instead of the strict Vulgate text "*Si linguis hominum loquar, et angelorum...*"), immediately followed by his own Italian translation. In Renaissance theology, charity was held as the supreme theological virtue (*forma virtutum*), without which faith and good works remain dead. Machiavelli highlights this to argue that moral duty toward God is inseparable from social and civic responsibility toward one's neighbor.

3. **…charity is patient, is kind…**: 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 *("Caritas patiens est, benigna est...").*
    - **Context:** Paul outlines the fifteen attributes of divine charity. In medieval and Renaissance moral philosophy, these characteristics were contrasted directly against the deadly sins (e.g., pride, envy, wrath, and greed). By invoking this catalogue,

Machiavelli emphasizes that lacking charity leads inevitably to social discord and civic cruelty, framing lack of charity as an active state of hostility toward one's community.

4. **…seventy times seven times…**: Matthew 18:21–22.
    - **Context:** In response to Peter's query asking whether forgiving an offending brother seven times was sufficient, Jesus replies: *"Non dico tibi usque septies, sed usque septuagies septies" ("I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven").* The number symbolizes boundless, unquantifiable divine grace. Machiavelli utilizes this biblical precept to demonstrate that divine mercy operates far beyond human mathematical or legalistic measures of justice.

5. **…forgave David his adultery and murder**: 2 Samuel 11–12.
    - **Context:** King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and subsequently arranged the death of her husband, Uriah the Hittite, in battle. When confronted by the prophet Nathan through the parable of the poor man's ewe lamb, David confessed ("Peccavi Domino", 2 Sam 12:13), and Nathan responded that God had put away his sin. Machiavelli emphasizes David's case because it represents two of the gravest sins possible—adultery and premeditated murder—yet even these were washed away through genuine, heart-felt contrition.
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6. **…thrice denied Him**: Matthew 26:69–75; Mark 14:66–72; Luke 22:54–62; John 18:15–27.
    - **Context:** During Jesus's trial before the High Priest, Simon Peter denied knowing Jesus three times out of fear. Peter's betrayal represents a supreme spiritual crime (treason against the divine master), matching David's grave secular crimes. Machiavelli pairs Peter and David to demonstrate that whether one's sin is against human life or divine loyalty, penitence remains an absolute, universal path to restoration.

7. **Miserere mei, Deus**: Psalm 51:1 (Vulgate Psalm 50:3): *"Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam".*
    - **Context:** Psalm 51 is traditionally regarded as David's prayer of repentance written immediately after Nathan confronted him regarding Bathsheba. In the Catholic liturgy, the Miserere is the preeminent Penitential Psalm. Machiavelli cites it to illustrate that verbal confession must be backed by genuine, tearful contrition of the heart.

8. **flevit amare**: Matthew 26:75 / Luke 22:62: *"Et egressus foras flevit amare" ("And he went out, and wept bitterly").*

- **Context:** The Gospel description of Peter's immediate reaction upon hearing the cock crow a second time, realizing he had fulfilled Jesus's prophecy of his denial. In Renaissance iconography and sermons, Peter's weeping (lautro di Pietro) became the standard symbol of heart-wrenching, transformative repentance that converts past weakness into apostolic leadership.

9. **…that all that pleases the world is a brief dream**: Petrarch, Canzoniere 1 *(Voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse il suono), line 14: "quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno".*
    - **Context:** Machiavelli closes his sermon not with a biblical quote, but with the famous final verse of Petrarch's opening sonnet in the Canzoniere. In Italian literary and religious custom, citing Petrarch's moral reflection on the vanity of worldly desires was a common rhetorical device to transition from theological argument to personal moral introspection. It reinforces the sermon's core message: that earthly glory and temporal desires are fleeting illusions compared to the eternal reality of God's mercy.

Niccolò Machiavelli's *Exortatione alla penitenza* (*Exhortation to Penitence*) was written around **1525–1527**, during the final years of his life (he died in June 1527).

Context and Occasion

- **The Lay Confraternity Setting:** The text was written as a sermon delivered to a lay religious confraternity (*compagnia di penitenza*) in Florence. As Machiavelli states in his opening lines, he composed and delivered the sermon *"per ubbidire alli miei maggiori"* ("in obedience to my superiors/elders"), addressing the assembled members as *"honorandi padri et maggiori fategli"* ("honored fathers and elder brothers").

- **The Florentine Confraternal Tradition:** In Renaissance Florence, lay brotherhoods regularly held evening devotional services where members—including lay citizens rather than ordained priests—were assigned to give spiritual exhortations on repentance, charity, and moral discipline.